



ANALYSIS

The Armed Groups Propping Up Venezuela's Government

[CARTEL DE LOS SOLES](#)

1 MAR 2019 BY VENEZUELA INVESTIGATIVE UNIT

EN



Reports from Venezuela are shocking the world with images of “colectivos,” police and military using excessive force -- even opening fire -- on unarmed civilians attempting to bring humanitarian aid into the country through its borders with Colombia and Brazil.

The latest incidents occurred on February 23 and left at least [four dead and more than 285 injured](#). The alleged perpetrators belong to three main government-backed groups: - the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB); - the Special Action Forces (Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales – FAES) of the national police (Policía Nacional Bolivariana – PNB); - and what are known as “colectivos,” groups that supported former President Hugo Chávez that over the years have grown increasingly armed and prone to engage in criminal activities.

The victims of the events on February 23 include several dozen people from the indigenous Pemón community who had to seek refuge in Brazil as well as journalists who were pursued, robbed and threatened by the armed groups.



Mass media and civilian witnesses alike released video footage of men on motorcycles dressed in black and armed with long guns and 9mm pistols. They gathered in packs and clashed with demonstrators who rejected the government of Nicolás Maduro.

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The border cities of Ureña in the state of Táchira and Santa Elena de Uairén in Bolívar have also reported uniformed GNB soldiers driving tanks and military vehicles through town and [shooting up homes](#) and businesses in an effort to force suspected members of the anti-Maduro resistance out into the open to better confront them.

Who are these groups? Why do they continue to so vehemently defend Maduro's now rapidly failing regime? How strong is their loyalty to a government that has been rejected by over 50 nations and is reported to have links to organized crime? Are Maduro's "armies" prepared to face a potential armed intervention in Venezuela? The following InSight Crime analysis will attempt to answer these questions.

Corrupt Military Leadership in the FANB



It is no secret that the Venezuelan National Armed Forces (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana – FANB) are the Maduro government's main prop, but just how strong is their support? And what is the basis for their loyalty?

Militarism has characterized the past 20 years of Chavista rule in Venezuela. Both Chávez and Maduro have fanned the flames of the FANB's loyalty by placing [military officials in virtually all](#) government institutions and militarizing public security forces. But they even went beyond those measures by granting the military new functions and -- perhaps most importantly -- new sources of income in their [creation of financial institutions](#), mining companies and other structures for them to run.

SEE ALSO: [Drug Trafficking Within the Venezuelan Regime: The 'Cartel of the Suns'](#)

But despite what the government's creation of so many state-owned companies may imply, the Venezuelan military's desire to maintain the status quo has more to do with lucrative businesses linked to organized crime, whose profits come from [drug trafficking](#), [illegal mining](#), smuggling, extortion and other illegal activities.

The fact that military officials -- many of whom hold leadership positions and simultaneously belong to the [Cartel of the Suns](#) criminal structure -- have illegally amassed this kind of economic power is likely why they continue to support Maduro. The problem is that it is a major obstacle for a peaceful transition of power in the country.

It is a different story for those lower in the hierarchy. While mid- to low-ranking officials and troops may participate in criminal activities and human rights violations, they do not have the power nor the income of their superiors and are often exposed to the country's widespread lack of food and medicine.

Amid the most recent wave of unrest, discontent within the military has come to the fore with a [mutiny at a military base](#) on January 21. Meanwhile, [411 members of the military have now deserted](#), seeking the amnesty self-declared interim President Juan Guaidó has offered them. It has been said that many of those who fled their military positions did so because they were forced to work with the colectivos.

Venezuelan NGO [Control Ciudadano](#) estimates that the four arms of the FANB (army, national guard, air force and navy) currently number between 136,000 and 140,000 troops.

The FAES and the SEBIN: Police and Torturers

FAES: Raids and Political Repression

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WHO ARE THEY?

A tactical unit within Venezuela's national police, the Special Action Forces (Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales – FAES) were formed by President Nicolás Maduro in 2017 during anti-government protests. The unit's members include both police officers and "colectivo" members.

WHAT DO THEY DO?

This force has been deployed to marginal neighborhoods to combat supposed criminals. But its members have actually raided homes, pursuing and allegedly killing protestors and others who oppose the Maduro regime.

675 victims
in Venezuela between
January 2017 and
January 2019

385 victims
in Caracas between
May 2017 and
January 2019

ACTIVITIES AND CRIMES

-  Extrajudicial execution
-  Torture
-  Arbitrary detention
-  Trespassing
-  Extortion
-  Robbery
-  Political repression



COMMONLY USED WEAPONS

9mm pistols
Glock 27 and Beretta PX4

Measurements
vary by model.



AR-15 and AK-47 rifles



HK MP5 9mm submachine gun



VEHICLES

-  Motorcycles
-  Pick-up trucks (Toyota and Ford)
-  Armadillos (armored vehicle)

Source: Monitor de Víctimas, PROVEA, InSight Crime and press reports

The FAES is an [elite unit that Maduro created](#) during the 2017 protests specifically to defend the Chavista revolution. Since then, it has morphed into little more than an extermination group, according to Venezuelan and international human rights organizations like PROVEA. The police unit has been involved in the alleged extrajudicial executions of more than 675 people from working-class neighborhoods, sometimes under accusations that they were criminals.

The FAES now stands at approximately 1,600 strong, an Interior Ministry official told InSight Crime, and has worked to [brutally oppress](#) the newest wave of Venezuela's anti-government protests since January.

"This is one of the few police groups that could remain loyal to Maduro because they have been indoctrinated and have received special training to act according to political objectives. They were created to handle political situations like the one going on right now in Venezuela. They're prepared to kill," the official told InSight Crime from Caracas.

He added that another reason why some of the FAES could remain loyal to Maduro is that many of them started out in the colectivos, groups that have always been sympathetic to the Chavez and Maduro governments and have become increasingly armed and violent. Maduro likely recruited so many FAES members from the colectivos for their callousness and bloodthirstiness, which has been confirmed by PNB and FAES officials who recently abandoned the police force as well as by colectivo leaders, all of whom spoke to InSight Crime from Venezuela.

But the FAES's ferocity may belie a general hum of discontent within many other branches of the PNB, including the national intelligence service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional – SEBIN) and the criminal investigation unit (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas – CICPC). Officers are becoming increasingly dissatisfied due to the worsening humanitarian crisis but are not speaking up for fear of being labeled traitors and consequently persecuted, according to police officials who spoke to InSight Crime.

Discontent in the SEBIN, however, became more apparent amid the contradicting orders regarding the January 13 [arrest of Guaidó](#) and the subsequent imprisonment of the 12 officers who carried it out.

Unlike with the military, the current number of security forces in Venezuela is unknown.

Colectivos Terrorizing the Border

Venezuela 'Colectivos': Crime and Social Control

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WHO THEY ARE

Venezuela's "colectivos" are government-funded armed groups comprised of civilians as well as employees of state security forces and other government institutions. They were originally created to defend the government of former President Hugo Chávez, but have evolved to engage in political repression and criminal activities.

WHAT THEY DO

Collectives attack, rob and kidnap supporters of the political opposition in Venezuela, diverting responsibility for human rights abuses away from the government while helping the government maintain social control over certain populations.

CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

-  Extortion
-  Robbery
-  Kidnapping
-  Hired killings
-  Small-scale drug dealing
-  Illegal food sales
-  Trespassing on private property



Ski masks or bandanas to cover the face

Black or camouflaged clothing

Armed with submachine guns

Clothes featuring Che Guevara and other communist imagery

Hip packs or tactical bags to conceal weapons. Radio equipment to communicate with each other and the police. Tear gas

Country
Venezuela



COMMONLY USED WEAPONS

9 mm pistols



AR-15



AK-47



VEHICLES

Generally black or white Toyotas

 Motorcycles

 Pick-up trucks or four-wheel-drive vehicles

Source: InSight Crime and press reports

Colectivos have played a major role in this year's newest bout of political tension. The groups rallied around Maduro as soon as he took office for his [disputed second term](#). Now, they have begun to expand their presence to the country's borders and give even stronger demonstrations of their support than before.

As InSight Crime reported, government officials in Táchira state on the border with Colombia created a ["border security colectivo"](#) in 2018. And this one includes members of the ELN and the FARC dissidence. The group put on a show of force on January 23, when it [opened fire](#) to prevent humanitarian aid from being brought into Venezuela. They shot at [journalists](#), volunteers and civilian members of the opposition in San Antonio del Táchira, on the Simón Bolívar International Bridge and in Santa Elena de Uairén.

SEE ALSO: [The Devolution of State Power: The 'Colectivos'](#)

Moreover, Humberto Prado, director of the Venezuelan Prison Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisioneros – OVP), accused the Maduro government of [releasing prison inmates](#) to fill the colectivos' ranks in their repression efforts.

Not only have the colectivos been expanding their reach in Venezuela -- they now have presence in [16 states](#) -- but they have also become almost [unrecognizable from the groups](#) that Chávez originally created.

To [stymie anti-Maduro sentiment](#), they now operate more like paramilitary shock troops of armed civilians and receive support from security forces. They participated in the government's [repression of the protests](#) in 2014 and 2017 as well as in a government initiative called "[Operation Liberation and Protection of the People](#)" (Operación de Liberación y Protección del Pueblo – OLP), which has been tied to human rights abuses and criminal acts.

Beyond their political oppression activities, the colectivos have gotten a foothold in [Venezuela's underworld](#), engaging in such criminal activities as extortion, kidnapping, drug trafficking and murder for hire.

In general, the colectivos have [supported Maduro](#) as they did Chávez. In an effort to advocate for their survival, one member of a sort of colectivo federation called the Revolutionary Secretariat of Venezuela (Secretariado Revolucionario de Venezuela) told InSight Crime that "if something happens, we'll have to go out and defend the government, because those who come will be coming for us."

But some are beginning to waver in their allegiance to the government because they have not been receiving the economic benefits they once did, and the country's crisis has been affecting them. At the same time, they fear persecution should they abandon the government's revolution.

As a colectivo leader in the 23 de Enero neighborhood of Caracas put it, "everyone is afraid here, but the people have shown that they want change, and the same thing is happening with the social organizations ... If something happens, most will run away. If something happens, only those willing to die will stay here."

The FARC Dissidence and the ELN: Trained and Armed



With the [National Liberation Army](#) (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) in the middle of Venezuelan territory and dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) regrouping at the border, Colombian guerrilla groups are contributing their fair share to the country's organized crime activity and driving instability levels up. They now operate in 13 of Venezuela's 24 states, according to the [International Crisis Group](#) (ICG).

During and after the peace process between Colombia and the FARC, several [groups of guerrillas dissented](#) and chose to continue trafficking drugs. Meanwhile, the ELN has continued to operate and is now Colombia's [number one enemy](#) with the FARC demobilized. Both groups have been [eying Venezuela](#) as a means to shield themselves from the Colombian authorities in a country that has been generally tolerant and accommodating towards them for the past 20 years.

Colombian guerrilla groups have even gone so far as to assume various state functions. The ELN now [runs the country's mining region](#). And while both they and area FARC dissidents had already established themselves along the border to [control the drug trafficking routes](#) between Colombia and Venezuela, this year's unrest has seen them take their support of the current administration to another level.

Case in point, ELN Central Command leader Israel Ramírez Pineda, alias "Pablo Beltrán," told British newspaper [The Telegraph](#) that, in the event of military intervention in Venezuela, they "would be on the front lines and would not hesitate" to defend the Maduro government.

It is unknown precisely how many people belong to the Colombian guerrilla groups operating in Venezuela and at the border, but ICG estimates an army of roughly 2,000 in the ELN alone. This makes the group's formidable criminal allies of the Maduro regime should an armed confrontation occur.

Photo Source: AP Images.

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